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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Informality in contemporary Cuban labor market An anthropological perspective

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ABSTRACT (max 150 words)

This article shall analyze from a socio-anthropological perspective, and based upon the data collected during ten years of qualitative research in La Habana (2007-2017), the phenomenon of informality in the Cuban contemporary labor market, in both discourse and practice, by considering the structural reasons (political and economic) along with the socio-cultural ones.

KEYWORDS: Ethnography; Informality; Labor market; Cuba; qualitative research.

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1. Prologue: smuggling cans of tomato sauce

During my first fieldwork in Cuba, in the fall of 2007, a boy with a black backpack would appear from time to time at the door of the house where I was hosted, looking as if he was doing something illegal. Back then, I still did not have much confidence with what I learned later to be called *la mecánica* (lit. the dynamics), or the adjustments that the population had found to face the food shortage, so I was more than amazed to discover that the precious burden that, so cautiously, the boy used to bring with himself was nothing but cans of tomato sauce. The reason for so much care was not in the nature of the load, as I so naively thought, but in the way the boy got the cans, which ended up being sold to my host and many other customers that had been accumulating over the years.

The tomato sauce can be considered, with respect to the contemporary Cuban market, one of the luxury goods. Its price, in the state stores that sell industrial products in the second local currency (CUC, convertible pesos), is around 2 CUC per liter. Considering that the average salary of state workers is around 25 CUC per month¹, one could guess that it is difficult for a family to regularly buy such a basic ingredient for the traditional Cuban cuisine. This explained why the boy with the black backpack had founded a good business in selling this simple product. He bought cans of tomato sauce from the employees of one of the state's five-star hotels that adorn the main streets of Havana. The employees made their little fraud by declaring that they consumed more tomato cans than they needed with the aim of selling them out *por la izquierda* (lit. on the left, means not following the regulated path). Then, the boy sold to other citizens who could not afford the cans regularly sold in the stores. Even if the boy loaded his percentage of smuggling on the selling, the price of cans was still more convenient than the official one.

¹ *Cuentapropistas* could usually count on a better salary, but the price of a tomato could be considered not that convenient, even for them. Indeed, by accessing the private market, a hairdresser could earn about 200 CUC per month and a taxi driver about 700 CUC per month, meanwhile a cardio-surgeon on the state's payroll earns an average of 50 CUC per month.

Since then I have repeatedly conducted on-site research activities in Cuba. These different rounds of fieldwork were woven together by an attempt to understand what kinds of informal practices Cuban citizens enacted, and which were the factors that encouraged my interlocutors engaging in those activities. The purpose of this article is thus to account for my findings and show how those income generating activities are deeply involved in maintaining the Marxist-Leninist system of value, although, in the same time, they betray the government and its capacity to rule the country.

2. The concept of informality in anthropology, a state of the art

In the early seventies, the anthropologist Keith Hart coined the term ‘informal economy’ to describe the complex flow of economic activities that do not conform with state regulations, because the workers do not have any licenses or/and do not pay any taxes (Hart, 1973; Castells & Portes, 1989). The concept of ‘informal’ was supposed to create a third alternative to the legal vs. illegal dichotomy, as well as to point out the existence of an “autonomous social space that belongs neither to the public nor to the private sector” (Centeno & Portes, 2006:25). Differently from the concept of ‘second economy’, which was usually used to describe income-generating activities that eluded centrally planned economies in Soviet Union and Eastern European countries (Alessandrini & Dallago, 1987; Sampson, 1987; Łoś, 1990), the concept of ‘informality’ was meant to include unregulated economic activities taking place in capitalist countries as well.

Even if both definitions are shaped upon Polanyi’s notion of the economy as entirely embedded in society, a sphere of activities that cannot be distinguished from politics, kinship or religion (Polanyi, 1957; Graeber, 2001), they enlighten two different perspectives of the phenomenon: the perspective of the individuals and the aggregate economic perspective (Neveling, 2014). Informality, as described by Hart, seems to embrace the individuals’ perspective: sub-proletariat members, to survive the disadvantageous inequity of governmental regulations, elaborate creative individual solutions to overcome common problems, such as price inflation and in-

adequate wages (Hart, 1973:61). In a similar way, the Peruvian economist Hernandez de Soto described informality as an act of individual rebellion against ‘mercantilist’ government, or excessive state regulations (de Soto, 1989; Pérez-López, 1995; Centeno & Portes, 2006; Coletto & Bisschop, 2017).

Otherwise, the concept of the second economy shed a light on a different level: the impact that these unregulated activities have on the economic system as a whole (Sampson, 1987; Loś, 1990). The entire economic system becomes doubled. A shadow marketplace, parallel to the official, could be equally (or more) important than the latter in terms of the volume of business, the range of production and distribution of goods and the number of people involved. Thus, the second economy represents not only a correction function to the strictly planned economy but also a terrain of political struggle (Pérez-López, 1995:11; Grossman, 1977).

Contemporary Cuban scholars have rarely applied the concept of second economy to the puzzled economic scenario of the country². The economist Jorge F. Pérez-López, stated in 1995, that the concept of ‘second economy’ was the most useful framework to describe Cuba’s unregulated income generating activities (1995:13). But with the gradual re-introduction of the private market, the framework perimeter became blurred and some scholars started to use this concept to describe the self-regulated work activities as a whole, even if they were regulated by a legal license. Otherwise, the concept of informality is still widely used among both Cubans scholars and citizens to describe many income generating activities (Fernandez, 2000).

Is ‘informal economy’ still a good theoretical framework? In a recent article, Patrick Neveling analysed the Mauritius Exporting Processing Zone (MEPZ), one of the numerous Special Economic Zones that have been crucial in the participation to the global market of the so-called peripheral countries³, as a paradigmatic

² Michalowski and Zatz wrote *The Cuban Second Economy in Perspective*, stemming from research carried out in the late eighties.

³ Cuba has recently instituted a Special Economic Zone that, similarly to Mauritius, is an Exporting Processing Zone held in the Mariel Harbour. It would be extremely interesting to conduct fieldwork there and comparatively analyse the data with Neveling’s work, but foreign researchers are currently forbidden to enter the zone.

situation to discuss the limit of the ‘informal economy’ concept (Neveling, 2014). He affirms that all the social actors involved in the MEPZ economic activities, including the state, were aware of the dubious legality of the economic transactions, making the dichotomy between formal-informal a less useful framework, but offering the chance for a sharp critic of the concept. Informality builds upon the idea of the existence of several economic activities ignored by or hidden from the state (Hart, 1973), Centeno and Portes have underlined this concept by stating that informal economies arise when there is a discrepancy between the ambition of the state regulating economy and its actual ability to enforce it (2006:29). Could we still use this concept when the state is conniving with the activities? Or when it is the state who breaks the rule? Or when the rules are so unclear that one could break them without even noticing? Neveling concludes by suggesting considering the distinction formal/informal as more useful to capture the emic perspective than to analyse such patterns (2014:77).

During my 2012 fieldwork in La Havana, I was investigating the rise of *cuentapropistas* (lit. those who work for their own account) phenomenon (Cuban citizens who got a license to work on their own after the 2011 reform⁴) and I started by separating ‘cuentapropistas’ from ‘informal workers’, by counting in the first group those who legally got the license and in the second who kept working privately without a formal recognition. It was plausible that, as some Cuban scholar suggested, by enacting a partial reform of the labour market, which allows getting a private practice, just a closed number of work categories and leaves out almost all the graduated professionals, the government was ‘condemning to informality’ (Henken,

⁴ I refer to the plan called *Proyecto de Lineamiento de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución* (lit. Guidelines of Economic and Social Policies of the Party and the Revolution), approved by the sixth PCC Congress and published on 17 April 2011. It allowed the opening of small and medium private enterprises in just explicitly determined work sectors. A Cuban resident could now open a restaurant or a hair salon or be a part of cooperative for construction. The aim of this crucial labour market reform was to balance the huge wave of dismissals that laid off more than one million workers, ending with what Mujal-León defined the “cornerstone of paternalistic state Fidel Castro had founded”: a country that guarantees as many jobs as the active working population needs (Mujal-León 2011, 155). By mid-2012, the number of private workers appeared to have reached 390,000 (Oxford Analytics, 17 August 2012) compared to 333,206 in September 2011 (Pavel Vidal & Pérez Villanueva 2012).

2002) a large group of state workers (Pavel Vidal & Pérez Villanueva, 2012; Brundenius & Torres Pérez, 2016; Russo, 2016). In 2013, an integration of 2011 reform was introduced to discourage the informal labour market. Public workers were allowed for the first time since 1968 to have a second private job. Since this new reform was enacted, university professors or even physicians could, for instance, get a license to rent a place for tourists or to sell food (Romanò & León, 2015)⁵. Despite the latter adjustment, many Cuban citizens keep practicing private activities without any license⁶, but informality cannot be reduced to that. During the most recent fieldwork I carried out (2016–17), the amount of informal economic activities set in place by *cuentapropistas* left a deep impression on me, thus I started to consider the distinction ‘with/without a license’ insufficient to describe the current situation. In the same way, to understand the Cuban informality, in both discourse and practice, the structural reasons (political and economic) should be considered along with the socio-cultural ones.

The Cuban sociologist Mayra Espina divides the forms that the informal economy currently adopts in the country into three main ones: 1) *occupational subtraction* qualifies those state workers who extract products from state facilities to sell them in the submerged market (for instance those hotel workers who were selling tomato cans); 2) *unreported economy* consists of actions that evade the requirements of reporting to government statistical offices, and therefore, the fiscal rules established as codified in the tax code. For example, non-recognition of services rendered to tourism such as housing, car rental and food services; and 3) *illegal or criminal economy*

⁵ It is maintained that professionals in active employment cannot practice their profession, except for those who were self-employed before 1964 and translators-interpreters. On this subject, see Resolution No. 32/2010.

⁶ A survey conducted in 2013 by the International Republican Institute (IRI) with a sample size of 688 Cuban adults, 15 percent of those polled declared they can be placed in the "informal market". Although without considering that the percentage could proportionally correspond to the proportions of workers in the informal sector, the findings confirm that many Cubans continue to work in private without official authorization. IRI, "Cuban Public Opinion Survey, January 20 – February 20, 2013," available at: <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013%20May%2024%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20January%2020-February%2020,%202013%20--%20English%20version.pdf>.

it covers the production and distribution of legally prohibited goods and services (Espina, 2010).

For the aim of this article, I shall focus my attention on the first two forms pointed out from Espina, leaving out all those activities that are illegal or criminal per se (for instance selling drugs) and add to this list a fourth category, which will allow observing the phenomenon from another perspective: the economy of favours. The latter concept was coined by the anthropologist Alena Ledeneva in 1998 while she was analysing 'blat' (informal exchange network) in Russia, and it has recently been at the verge of a new debate in our discipline (Henig & Makovicky, 2018). In Ledeneva's perspective, favour should be considered an ambivalent action "that involves the sharing or redistribution of material or non-material resources driven by material or non-material incentives associated with maintaining or extending social relations" (Ledeneva, 2018:26). Thus, doing a favour should be considered a non-economic way of action with both economic consequences (in the way it nourishes the shadow market) and non-economic ones (in the way it nourishes social connections and self-estimation) (Humphrey, 2018). The ambivalence of favour does not only lie in its duality as both economic and non-economic practice but also in a sort of 'double standard' that made favour networks possible (Yurchak, 1997). Indeed, on one hand doing favours implies the willingness to help others, the sharing of a deep feeling of mutual understanding (Ledeneva 1998). On the other hand, doing favours involves not only redistribution of personal resources but also of public ones, because, and here lies the double standard, stealing from the State is considered morally acceptable due to the "pervasive attitude that everybody is doing it" (Sampson, 1987:134).

Stemming from those premises, this article shall discuss what are the implications of using the concept of informality in the analysis of the puzzled Cuban labour market. I shall follow Neveling's suggestion that informality is best analysed as an emic category, and discuss the practices I could observe and the ones that my interlocutor shared with me in our interviews in the three-fold conceptual framework based on 'occupational subtraction', 'unreported economy' and 'economy of fa-

vours'. Those concepts and the dynamics that interplay among them would be considered both heuristic tools and objects of critical examination.

3. A three-fold conceptual framework: the research questions

When the Economic Guidelines were approved during the Sixth Congress of the PCC, and then updated in the Seventh Congress on 17 April 2011, the government declared that this modification represented only an 'update of the socialist model'. Despite the changes and the introduction of a form of capital production that had no precedent in Cuban socialist design⁷, the Congress emphasized the idea that socialism introduced by the 1976 Constitution was not dying; it simply needed to be 'updated' to enable the country to move forward economically. Coherently with this statement, the Guidelines were presented as a technical process that did not need to carry with itself a parallel model of reform of the political structure. As stated by the Cuban economist Pedro Monreal González (2014), the government expressed in terms of 'updating' and not of 'reform', evidencing that politics was not involved in this change. This decision brought on a storm of neologisms (like perpetrating the use of the term 'cuentapropistas', which ultimately stands for 'private worker') and a variable number of dispensations, for instance, the one mentioned that allows a doctor to be a private tourist guide, but not to open a private medical practice. Neologisms and dispensations are strategically used by the government to maintain the public socialist discourse, but they contribute to making the distinction between licit and illicit activities blurred, which, as we will see, has deep consequences on social habits as well.

In the previous paragraph, I referred to a three-fold conceptual framework that combines Espina's concepts of 'occupational subtraction' and 'unreported economy' with Ledeneva's concept of 'economy of favours'. The dynamics tying up at least two of those concepts could be unfolded, for instance, in an episode that

⁷ Such as the introduction of small and medium private enterprises.

occurred during my last fieldwork. In January 2017, the mother of one of my interlocutors⁸ got sick; she was an old lady and she had strong back pain that needed to be examined with an X-ray. Her son took her to the hospital and for doing so he asked the first favour: a lift from his neighbour who owns a car (personal resource favour). Then, after arriving at the hospital, the doctor who examined the old lady admitted that sadly he had no film for doing an X-ray; he was expecting to receive it in a week and that it would probably take a week more to have it. So, my interlocutor called a friend of his who works in a military hospital⁹ asking her to *resolver* (lit. to solve, but indicate the ability to find a product not available in the official market) an X-ray film (public resource favour). The use of the verb *resolver* indicates that this particular way of acting is not even considered 'stealing' or 'subtracting'. This makes Espina's first category somehow blurred. The occupational subtraction does not only involve the 'stealing to sell' but also the 'stealing to do a favour', which adds a gradient of complexity to be considered in the analysis. Indeed, the doctor who facilitated the X-ray film to her friend was subtracting something from her hospital, threatening the public good by stealing, but at the same time, by giving the film to a patient from another hospital, she was also guaranteeing that the promise of universal access to health care was maintained. But there is something more. When my interlocutor could provide via the favour network what his mother should have received just for citizen rights, he was also stating in some way he was capable to find a personal solution (finding the X-ray film) to a common problem (shortage in medical supply). The favour, thus qualifies as an 'exception' of the ordinary, something that holds the ability of temporary subverting the rules, gifting the people involved with a 'social warmth'. "The pleasure drawn from enacting a world in which (...) things can be done differently, albeit just for us, exceptionally" (Holbraad, 2018: 230).

⁸ Further in this paper, I will present my interviewees and explain why I call them 'interlocutors' rather than 'informants'.

⁹ Military facilities are known in the country to be the best supplied. To say that "one went to a military hospital", it colloquially means one got the best care possible.

Another example of how the concepts of ‘occupational subtraction’ and ‘unreported economy’ are tied together could be brought from the ethnographic sketch that opens the article. The boy with the backpack buys his supplies from hotel workers, who subtract the tomato cans from their employer’s kitchen (occupational subtraction). At the same time, he sells those products without a proper license, thus evading tax rules (unreported economy). Indeed, there is a cheap and legal way to buy tomato sauce, for instance, buying the handmade one that could be found in farmer’s market, but to access the one sold to the hotels means to access something that for its price and distribution chain is, or seems, over the means of common citizens. In other terms, by ‘subverting rules’, the act of buying the tomato cans from the smuggler adds a symbolic value to the transaction, which is particularly important in those societies where economic capital is scarce (Prost, 2006).

The X-ray affair and the tomato can smuggler I described are by no means archetypal, but they provide what seems to me a good description of the motivations and concerns that keep in motion both favour networks and other informal activities. They also allow a brief reflection on the symbolic capital involved in both transactions, which could be considered this sense of ‘subverting rules’. Holbraad also referred to favours, but it does not cease to exist when there is also an economic transaction on the table.

4. Informality and obliquity: a methodological assessment

During my last fieldwork in La Havana (December 2016–February 2017), I collected 25 long non-structured and semi-structured interviews with private workers (*cuentapropistas* and salaried private staff) and state workers with second informal income generating activities, which were selected thanks to the solid non-academic network I have built in Cuba during my previous fieldwork in La Habana and Cienfuegos. To address a crucial factor such as the role of the family in labour decisions, I chose my interviewees in a family group (i.e. parent-child, husband-wife). Indeed, I met numerous families that combine different work relationships (i.e. a parent is

on the State payroll, the other is self-employed, one child has emigrated and another is a salaried private employer, and at least one of them is also operating in the informal market). This economic multi-spatiality (Romero, 2015) has been a privileged feature in the interviewee selection. The interviews, along with notes taken every day, local newspapers and visual data (photos and short videos), provided the material for my writing.

My research ethnographic method is inspired by the ‘obliquity’ approach suggested by Ledeneva (1998, 2018), which means it relied upon “people’s willingness to share their experiences and framing the most interesting ones in case studies” (2018: 42). Indeed, as Ledeneva argued, analysing informality means to be able to ask your interviewees to talk openly (and while being recorded) about something that is considered a secret, in the way it is excluded from formal and official discourse, so it requires a solid relationship of trust between the researcher and his/her interlocutors. For this reason, the data from the interviews are accompanied by several months of participant observation over the past 10 years¹⁰. Finally, I consider my interviewees ‘interlocutors’ rather than ‘informants’ (Malighetti, 2004). This terminological choice aims to emphasize the fact that I discuss my research aims with them before setting a proper interview, and I dialectically consider their forms of interpretation while elaborating on mine. This also mean I always disclose to them my aims and my role as researcher and ethnographer, and I guarantee anonymity to them by using fictitious names and by concealing those demographic characteristics that are not essential to the analysis.

¹⁰ Another level of difficulty is added from the partiality of the statistical sources. Since ‘informality’ could not be considered from formal and official discourse, it is impossible to find national data about it. Moreover, even the data that cover the official matter, for instance, labour force distribution and medium salary, are not completely disclosed by the Cuban government.

5. Informality and kinship: two Cuban families as case studies

For the aims of this article, I have chosen two families who know each other and live in the same neighbourhood, the Perez and the Delgado families. I shall describe their daily practices and interpret them in light of the three chosen categories of informality. The aim is to critically reflect upon the categories while applying them to the ethnographic data gathered.

5.1. *The Delgado family*

The Delgado family lives in a suburb of La Havana and, like the Perez I will further describe, they are a couple on their second marriage. Leandro (1958) and Dulce (1960) were the main interlocutors of the Delgado family and my host during three different episodes of fieldwork in La Havana (2010, 2012, 2016–17). Having the chance to live with them gave me the possibility to closely observe their daily practices and to witness some interesting events, such as the anecdote of the ‘X-ray film favour’ I wrote about in the third paragraph of this article.

Leandro has offspring from his first marriage, which were not involved in my research due to their not having so close a relationship with their father. Dulce has two sons from her first marriage, which used to live with her and Leandro but were both abroad during my last fieldwork. The older son migrated in 2011, while his brother left the country in 2016. Although they do not live with Leandro and Dulce anymore, Dulce’s offspring play an important role in the Delgado domestic economy by sending remittances and providing some white goods, which, as I will explain, are not available in the local market.

Leandro was a FAR special agent¹¹, a member of the famous counter-intelligence group that was involved in investigating terroristic threats during the Cold War. He retired more than a decade ago, and during my latter fieldwork, he

¹¹ The acronym FAR stands for *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, literally ‘Revolutionary Arms Force’, which is what the military is called in Cuba.

was selling handmade chocolates on the informal market. Indeed, he started working in a sugar manufacturing plant at 17 and got married; then, after serving in the military, he decided to enrol in the Armed Forces and graduated in Security Studies in Germany to be able to acquire a better military grade. He told me in our first interview in 2012, “I was in the army for almost 30 years. I like what I did. I thought it was the best and it was going to last forever, but I was wrong”¹². When he retired from the army¹³, he worked in the security staff of a local facility, but then he decided to start to work as a clerk for a farmers market in the neighbourhood where he lives with his second wife Dulce, whom he met in 2001. He worked there for some years, then he went to work as a clerk for a private tourist shop in the historic centre of the city. Then, after one year, he went running the *casa particular* of a family friend, and finally, after two more years, he decided to start an informal enterprise with one of his neighbours. They buy chocolate powder and make homemade chocolates to be sold, without a license, to café and private clients.

Working in the informal market, Leandro makes three times the salary of his wife, Dulce, who has been a university professor for almost 30 years. Dulce defines herself as “deeply in love with her job”, although, as she told me, she must rely almost completely upon her husband and her sons to make ends meet. Indeed, this is not an uncommon situation for state workers and for university professors, particularly. The medium level of salary for ‘professionals’ (physicians, architects, lawyers, professors and engineers) ranges from 530 to 850 *pesos* per month, one of the two official currencies (comparable to the value of 20–30 CUC, *pesos convertibles*, the second currency, which is equivalent to the American dollar)¹⁴. To understand this sal-

¹² Leandro never told me why he retired so early from the army. Since he received a special medal of honour for his past service during my last fieldwork, I have good reason to think it was probably for personal reasons. His stepson described to me the time Leandro was in the army as “very challenging” for the entire family, since “he was sent to missions abroad and he could not even let his family know where he was and for how long he was staying there” (interview with Fernando, 2010).

¹³ It is worth mentioning here that retirement salaries are extremely low, so it is very common that after retiring one starts to work on the private or the informal market.

¹⁴ In 2004 the government managed to substitute the US dollar by introducing a second local currency, the *convertible pesos*, called CUC. The CUC introduction into the local market dramatically decreased the purchasing value of the Cuban state wages. Since then, state workers are living in a peculiar economic paradox. Their salaries are paid in *pesos* (CUP), which are changed to CUC (25:1), but they mostly buy goods in CUC, which became the main currency in the local markets. The double

ary purchasing power, it is possible to compare it with the prices of a basket of common products, for instance, one bottle of shampoo costs on average 60 pesos; 1 litre of tomato sauce has the same price; four toilet rolls cost 25 pesos; the prices of fruits and vegetables have held steady as well as those of rice, sugar, and bread. As shown by the following table, the salaries of school teachers and university professors are below the average and have not really increased from 2014 (where, for instance, the salary of agricultural workers increased by about 32.6%, the salary of sugar plant workers increased by about 23%, and the salaries of professors and teachers increased by about 1%).

Table 1 – Medium monthly salary per job category in local currency (pesos).

Job category	2014	2016
Agriculture workers	679	1006
Sugar plant workers	963	1246
Public health workers	712	816
Education (teachers/professors)	527	533
Construction workers	674	985
Total	584	740

^a *Source: author elaboration on data from ONE (National Cuban Agency for Statistics), Cuba Statistic Yearbook 2016.*

To be able to make ends meet, Dulce, as well as many other Cubans, engaged in some informal activities, for instance, giving private lessons or renting a room without a license to foreign university fellows. The latter activity could be considered as unreported economy (since she does not have a license to rent a room) but, in some way, could also be considered an act of occupational subtraction (since she somehow exploits her role as a professor to find tenants). During the years between her first and second marriage, she told me in our first interview in 2008 that she gave private classes to seven kids “to be able to feed her two boys”. Lately, she has been helping Leandro in his new enterprise of selling homemade chocolates, which she described in our latter interview (February 2017) as “a huge economic relief”. Al-

currency that was held to distinguish foreigners from residents or to protect state socialism from the political and economic *shock* of foreign direct investment, currently points out the gap between those who can afford dollar prices and those who cannot afford them.

though, describing to me what she owns, she always mentions the formula “thanks to the boys” (*muchachos*, lit. “boys”, which is the way she refers to her two adult children). She owns a laptop “thanks to the boys”, she broke her old shaker but she could buy a new one “thanks to the boys”, and so on.

Remittances have a crucial role in the domestic economy of Cuban families, reaching 62% of Cuban households and sustaining about 90% of the retail market. Money sent from overseas far exceeds the net profits from tourism, nickel, and medical products manufactured by the Cuban biotech industry (Ritter, 2013). But Cubans leaving abroad do not send just money to their family, they also send white goods, such as computers, laptops, mobile phones and other kinds of devices which, due to the US embargo, are impossible to find in the local official market. The lack of supplies has been feeding the informal market and the *mula* (lit. mule) system. The term *mula* is colloquially used to refer to those Cubans that, having both Cuban and foreign passports¹⁵, can import a certain quantity of goods into the country, paying the importation tax at the airport. Afterwards, they can sell those goods without any regulation (on price, quality or income tax)¹⁶. The connivance of the state with those forms of unreported economy is paradigmatic in the way the government exploits the *mula* system. By collecting heavy tariffs, the government directly profits from this system of importation. Moreover, by allowing the importation (and implicitly the selling on the shadow market) of many goods that the country could not import due to the US embargo, the state manages to overcome some of the embargo outcomes allowing citizens partial access to the international market.

Leandro acquired chocolate moulds through the help of a friend, who travels as a *mula* between Panama and Cuba four times per year. He and his wife take

¹⁵ According to many international newspapers covering the news (i.e. Reuters agency website), more than 70,000 Cubans got Spanish citizenship due to the “grandchildren law”, which, in 2009, gave the possibility to all Cubans having Spanish ancestors (namely grandfather, grandmother or both) to claim Spanish citizenship. Many of them used their European passport as a migration vector, but some of them stayed in the island and started traveling back and forth to neighbouring countries buying goods to sell on the informal market. Unfortunately, official statistics on this topic are not available.

¹⁶ Even if the import tax is high and the *mula* must pay for their own trip, the cost of the product they sell still remains lower than the one in the local marketplace.

care of the teenage daughter of their friend while she is abroad, and in exchange, they receive some ‘gifts’, namely the moulds in this scenario. Using another favour, Leandro got the recipe for the chocolates, and, considering he could not officially advertise his activity, he runs his business through a complex network of acquaintances. When I asked him how he built his network and how he could reach so many clients (he was selling about 700 chocolates per week during my last fieldwork), he told me, “You know, there is no socialism in Cuba anymore, what we have left is *sociolismo* (lit. “friend-ism” or “partner-ism.”)” (interview, February 2017). The term *sociolismo* is a colloquial neologism that comes from the term *socio*, which literally means ‘partner’ but is used colloquially to refer to those who belong to one’s ‘favour network’, and it ironically sounds similar to the term *socialismo* (Spanish for ‘socialism’) (Cherneski, 2018). Both the potentiality of the favour networks and the pervasiveness of informality, while they have certainly played a role in mitigating the consequences of ineffective distribution of goods (Ledeneva, 2018), have also nourished the gap between legality and legitimacy (Giordano, 2015), as Cubans tend to prefer to circumvent the legal framework via personalised social networks, even if not strictly necessary (Russo, 2017).

Thus, Leandro and Dulce are involved in many informal activities, the main one being the selling of chocolates, but they also rent a room in their home to foreign scholars, from time to time. They are also involved in various favour networks. When I asked Leandro why does he not own a license for the ‘chocolate business’ (as he used to call it), he answered that he will eventually get one, but he was waiting to “clear his head about the regulation”. He explained to me:

See, those new regulations about *cuentapropistas* are so muddled you cannot understand, I went to three different places to know what kind of documents I need to formalize my activity and nobody seemed to know clearly about it, should I have a pastry lab or am I allowed to do it from home? Could I sell to coffee shops or should I be limited to private clients? Nobody gave me clear answers, so I am just following the flow and waiting (interview, February 2017).

Leandro's chocolate business falls in Espina's category of 'unreported economy', although it is the pervasiveness of the 'economy of favour' that makes it feasible. It is the embeddedness of informal practices in the moral imagination of citizens that makes it a solution that is acceptable to all parties involved (for Leandro who carries out the business, for his clients and of course for his family).

5.2. *The Pérez family*

The Pérez family comes from a little town in the centre of the country, but they have been living in a suburb of La Havana for the past 25 years. Luis (1959) and Silvia (1962), which have been the main interlocutors of their family during my investigation, are both *cuentapropistas* and former state workers. They have two daughters, and they both have offspring from a previous marriage. Silvia has a son who migrated in 2012, and Luis has a daughter, a medical doctor who was working 'on a mission' abroad¹⁷. During my latter fieldwork, their older daughter was a medical student, and the little one was attending secondary school.

Silvia has graduated in Education Studies and has worked as a school secretary for almost 20 years. Then, when the 2011 *Lineamientos* re-opened to the private market, she decided to quit her state job and started to work as a clerk in a pizza parlour near her home, which she described as "I had a better salary and fewer responsibilities" (interview, January 2017). After a couple of years, she decided she was "tired of working for someone else" and convinced her husband to open a family run café.

Luis has graduated in Mathematics. After his bachelor's degree, he pursued a Master of Business Administration and, since 1994, has been the director of a public Cuban enterprise. Since he was a high official, he received some benefits from the Ministry, such as a mobile phone paid for by the agency, a modern car and a salary of about 1600 pesos, which were quite good for the Cuban average, as well as

¹⁷ As of 2014, approximately 50,000 Cuban health workers were serving 65 countries all over the world. As I argued in a recent article, participating in a health mission abroad was also a good (and legal) way for a medical doctor or a nurse to receive some benefits (Russo, 2016).

the possibility to work and travel abroad¹⁸. Luis was a state worker until 2014 when he resigned from his job and opened a ‘casa particular’ (bed and breakfast). He told me in our first interview in 2012, although his job was better remunerated than the average state job, it was not enough to address the needs of his family. Finally, he left the bed and breakfast in 2016 to open a café with his wife.

Like many Cuban *cuentapropistas*, Silvia and Luis got their license for their café and transformed the terrace of their ground floor apartment into a counter where clients could order, retire and pay through the windows for take-away meals cooked in the kitchen of their house. On paper, Luis is the owner of the café, Silvia is the first employee, and they have a second employee serving as a cook, Marta. But, even though they own a legally obtained license, many of their daily practices can be thought of as ‘informal’. For instance, the fact that they have a third employee, Ada, who helps Marta in the cooking but is not legally employed and, most importantly, the way they supply their kitchen.

Indeed, when I asked Silvia, what does she find challenging in their new enterprise, she told me:

Buying the products. I mean food, but also plates and glasses... all you need to run a little take-away... We had to rent a car, just for *resolver en la calle* (lit. solving the problem ‘in the streets’, which stands for informal market), and my son sent us some nice plates (from abroad) with my sister when she came here visiting. See, the problem is you cannot buy wholesale, they want you to buy from the state grocery store, which is like “maybe today I will find pasta”, “maybe tomato sauce will disappear for a month” ... you know how it is. I got eggs today, how long did we look for them? About two weeks (interview, January 2017).

The current Cuban regulations do not allow *cuentapropistas* to buy wholesale. They should buy all the products or raw materials they need for their work activities

¹⁸ The opportunity to travel abroad was, until 2013 (when the law preventing Cuban citizens from travelling freely without formal governmental authorization was repealed) and to a certain extent it still is, the desired object both symbolically and at a material level. In the latter case, it represented the possibility to gain goods not available or at lower prices than on the local market. Symbolically, it represented a privileged status and a higher feeling of freedom.

from retail state vendors, disregarding the quantity they need. This brings about at least two problems: a) by buying raw materials by retail they should charge more for their services/products, which will sensibly drop the number of their clients and therefore their incomes and b) the state market offers a very limited choice of products and very high prices. The ineffective distribution of goods in Cuba was described by the anthropologist Cristina Pertierra with the concept of “frustrated consumption” (Pertierra, 2007:4), the everyday struggle to obtain goods that were hard to obtain on the *pesos* market and that can only be found in *chopin*, Cubanization of the word ‘shopping’, which indicates CUC shops (Pertierra, 2007, 2011). The frustrated consumption is caused by two interrelated phenomena. The first one is the peculiar economic paradox Cuban citizens have been living since 1993 when the US dollar was legalized as a means of payment and then substituted in 2004 by the introduction of a second local currency (CUC). State salaries are paid in pesos (CUP), the first currency which is changed to CUC (25:1), but Cubans mostly buy goods in CUC, a process that dramatically decreases the purchasing value of their salaries. The second one is that, even in the *chopin*, a lot of products remain a mirage. White goods are hard to find, fresh meat and fresh fish are very difficult to buy¹⁹ and a lot of products are just available now and then.

For the mentioned reasons, Luis rented a car that he uses to *resolver* all the ingredients they need for running the café on the informal market, and in his free time, he uses the car as an informal taxi, driving around acquaintances in exchange for favours or money, depending on the situation. By accompanying Luis during one of his grocery shopping trips, I observed the different kinds of informal practices his shop is based on. He relies on personal favours to know where and when the selling will take place or who to call to receive some products (economy of favours). Moreover, some goods are sold via ‘brokerage’, so he pays a commission to the person who helps him acquire the product, for instance, fresh fish caught by sailors, unreported and sold through a broker (unreported economy). Finally, some

¹⁹ Processed meat and fish are easier to find, but they have quite a high cost compared to the local medium wage; a simple can of tuna costs around 50 CUP (or 2 CUC).

products come from informal selling (or donation) of state provisions, for instance, the cans of tomato sauce described in the prologue (occupational subtraction).

In addition to the described practices, since no receipts are needed by law (neither for the acquired ingredients nor for the sold meals), it is almost impossible to say if the taxes Silvia and Luis pay are fairly measured. Theoretically, they need to pay two type of taxes. One fixed monthly tax just to keep their license, and one yearly tax that should match the 10 percent of the amount actually gained. Nevertheless, the relatively recent opening to private job market activities has found the state policy unprepared to rule the income tax system or at least to have a verification system for checking the incomes of *cuentapropistas*, for instance, there is not a clear regulation about receipts²⁰.

Conclusions

During my fieldwork, I asked my interviewees which are, in their opinion, the structural reasons that jeopardize the possibility of a common *cuentapropista* to have a completely legal set of activities. According to their answers and my observant participation, as I show in the article, those reasons could be summarized as follows: a) the state does not manage to enforce the tax rules; b) the uncertainty of the rules; c) the ineffective distribution of goods; and d) the proscription against buying wholesale (Pavel Vidal & Pérez Villanueva 2014).

These reasons are, indeed, economically challenging for those who are building their private enterprises, but their political and cultural meaning should not be considered less important than their economic impact in term of favouring informal over legal frameworks of action. For instance, the ineffective distribution of goods is not only affecting consumption by creating frustrating consumers as described by Pertierra (2007, 2011) but also representing the failing of the rationing system. Indeed, the average salary and those few products received through the *li-*

²⁰ Except for the “casas particulares” (lit. private houses, local term for “bed and breakfast”), which have a register where they need to put all the room fees, they are also subject to stricter government control, as they usually host foreigners.

libreta system²¹, for instance, and the other gratuities have stopped supplying the population with necessities since the second half of the 2000s. This failing, paired with a centrally planned economy where some products could only be acquired legally by distribution, not only created the condition for people to get used to the exchange of products and favours but also corroborated the idea that those activities were necessary family survival strategies, although they were illegal and still were (and are) considered legitimate (Giordano, 2015).

As for the other mentioned reasons, the unenforced tax regime, the uncertainty of the rules and the proscription against buying wholesale seem to be double bonded with the resilience of the planned economy system. Despite many scholars speaking about Cuba in terms of ‘transition’ (Leiva, 2000; Ritter, 2005; Feinberg, 2013; Brundenius & Pérez, 2015), a theory that posits transition is “a progressive set of stages along a unidirectional path from communism to capitalism” (Phillips 2007:334), contemporary Cuba is hardly on its way toward a free market and liberal democracy, inasmuch as we consider those phenomena as ideal typical conceptions. Neveling criticizes anthropology's common notion of the “working of markets”, because it is “often built on the premises of a historical shift from regulated markets to self-regulated markets” or in Polanyi's terms from “human economy” to “market economy” (Neveling, 2014: 69; Polanyi, 1957, 1977). Cuba seems a good case study to challenge this bias, not only because, due to the continuity of the PCC leadership, this historical radical shift never happened but also because both forms of political-economic regimes are cohabiting and dialectically merging together. For instance, by not allowing *cuentapropistas* to buy wholesale, the government is trying to control and limit size and incomes of the relatively new private sector. On the other hand, by evading these rules by buying their supplies on the informal market, the *cuentapropistas* are re-defining in their own terms their relationship with the state.

Damián Fernández (2000), analysing Cuban informal economy, suggested considering it as both one of the most formidable adversaries of the Socialist state

²¹ The *libreta* (lit. little book) is a kind of monthly coupon providing basic goods, such as eggs, chicken, rice, bread, beans, etc.

and an instrument that provides citizens with enough creativity to escape it and to deal with the socialist asset. Emma Phillips, who investigated the outcomes of the Special Period and the consequent labour market reform that introduced the *cuentapropista* figure, pointed out that Decree 141 of the Law (1993)²² has brought a “legal creation of an anomaly”, leading *cuentapropistas* to “embody an increasing tension between Cuba’s socialist past and uncertain future” (2007:312). What Phillips wanted to stress by using the paraphrase “legal creation of an anomaly” is that the partial reformation of the labour market, which allowed private jobs just in certain sectors²³, has contributed to shaping a different type of economy that is difficult to define legal or informal per se, but which floats between the two domains.

Thus, using the term ‘informal economy’ or informality as a theoretic framework to describe the daily practices of Cubans to make ends meet could be considered not completely satisfying. As Neveling suggested in the case of Mauritius, the term ‘informality’ is certainly useful to describe the local or emic point of view but to analyse those practices it would be useful to focus on the micro-dynamics and micro-processes enacted by subjects, while they are coping with uncertainties in the transformations of the market. Stemming from those premises, I found that Espina’s tripartite definition (occupational subtraction, unreported economy and criminal economy) combined with Ledeneva’s concept of economy of favour could be the most appropriate theoretical framework for an in-depth ethnographic analysis of contemporary Cuban practices. First, the concept of occupational subtraction describes well the tendency, common in post-Soviet countries, to consider ‘stealing from the state’ perfectly legitimate, because, as Ledeneva explained, “the illegitimacy of private property, legitimizes the use of public property” (Ledeneva 2018:31). Secondly, the concept of unreported economy, made to de-

²² In late 1960, when the ‘Sovietisation’ of Cuban society began, private workers still existed. Most of them were peasants and drivers, but there were also physicians, optometrists, dentists and veterinarians. The Decree 141 of Law (1978) stated the possibility of private practice to the people who graduated before 1959. The Decree 141 of Law allowed 55 job activities, and 117 more were allowed in 1995 (Phillips, 2007). Then, no new licenses were released until 2011.

²³ For the complete list of authorized categories for self-employment, see *Gaceta Oficial*, No. 027, Special Edition, Resolution 42/2013, 26 September 2013, Annex.

scribe all these economic activities exerted without a license, is also useful to overcome the dichotomy ‘with or without license’, because, as the gathered data suggest, even where there is a registered license, we can still find some unreported economic activities. Finally, the concept of economy of favour points out that not all the exchanges and the subtractions are operated for economic advances, some of them, by building or corroborating networks, are instrumental not only for individuals but also to the survival of institutions. For instance, the anecdote of the X-ray film shows how the individuals, by subtracting from a better supplied facility and redistributing via favours, contribute to sustaining the fair access to public health services.

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